

Learning Gender Roles

by Judson Landis

from *Sociology*, a textbook

Thirty pairs of parents were questioned within twenty-four hours after the birth of their first child. They were asked to “describe your baby as you would to a close relative.” Hospital information on the babies showed that the fifteen boy babies and the fifteen girl babies did not differ on such objective data as birth length, weight, irritability, etc. But the parents said that girl babies were softer, littler, more beautiful, prettier, more finely featured, cuter, and more inattentive than the boy babies. The fathers tended to label, or stereotype, the babies in this fashion more than the mothers. The authors of the study suggest that sex typing and sex-role socialization have already begun at birth.

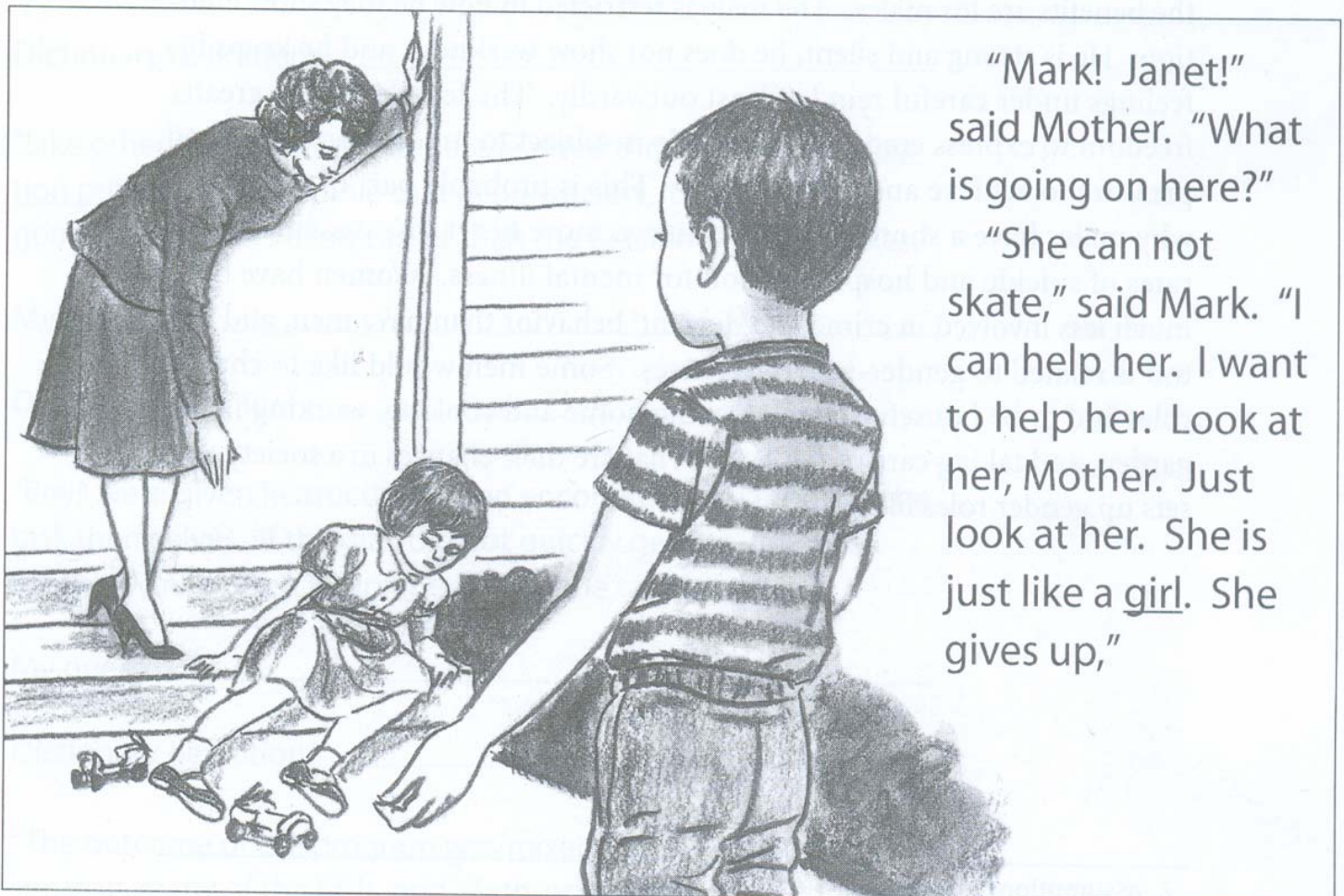
How could this be? One day and already babies are showing definite gender differences in terms of physical appearance and temperament. The answer, of course, is that *it isn't so*. People assume that males and females are born with different abilities and temperaments. People assume it to be so, and then behave as if it were so. We tend to act toward children one way if they are male, another way if they are female. We expect them to be a certain way, and they turn out that way.



2 Like other roles, gender roles are learned through the socialization process. It is possible that in our society the teaching of gender roles starts even earlier than the teaching of other roles. As we saw above, parents immediately start acting differently toward their children based on their gender. Look at their toys: Boys get tractors, trucks, tools, guns, and athletic equipment; girls get dolls, cooking sets, play perfume and cosmetic kits, and pretty clothes.

3 The schools continue the pattern. Textbooks portray boys in active, aggressive, so-called masculine roles and girls in passive, tender, so-called feminine roles. A study of teachers in nursery schools¹ found that they spent more time with the boys in the class than with the girls. Boys were encouraged to work harder on academic subjects. They were given more rewards and more directions in how to do things. Boys were given instructions, then encouraged to complete the task themselves. If the girls did not quickly get the idea, the teacher would often intervene and do the task for them. There was one exception: The teachers did pay more attention to the girls on

Textbook, 1966. What is this textbook teaching about gender roles?



"Mark! Janet!" said Mother. "What is going on here?"

"She can not skate," said Mark. "I can help her. I want to help her. Look at her, Mother. Just look at her. She is just like a girl. She gives up,"

1 nursery schools child-care centers

feminine gender-typed activities such as cooking. Even here girls got praise and assistance, whereas boys got detailed instructions. The boys were given more attention, and the environment was much more of a learning experience for them than it was for the girls. Studies have found the same thing: more attention to males than to females throughout the grades and a “let me do it for you” attitude toward females, even at the college level.

Another group of researchers working in the Boston area found that gender-role differences were well developed in the majority of children by the age of five. The children knew which personality traits were “masculine” and which were “feminine.” They knew which jobs were for men and which were for women. The experimenters developed a curriculum that attempted to make the children more flexible in their assumptions² about the sexes. The outcome of the program was mixed. To the researchers’ surprise, many of the fifth- and ninth-grade boys with whom they worked became more stereotyped in their views of women and more rigid and outspoken about what they thought to be the woman’s place. The effects on the girls in the program were more positive, showing attitude change away from typical stereotypes and increased self-esteem.³

The results of gender-role stereotyping are many and varied, and not all the benefits are for males. The male is restricted in how he may show emotion: He is strong and silent, he does not show weakness, and he keeps his feelings under careful rein,⁴ at least outwardly. The female has far greater freedom to express emotion. The male is subject to much more stress and pressure to achieve and be successful. This is probably part of the reason why males have a shorter life expectancy, more heart disease, and higher rates of suicide and hospitalization for mental illness. Women have been much less involved in crime and deviant⁵ behavior than have men, and this too is related to gender-role differences. Some men would like to change roles and to be househusbands, staying home and cooking, working in the garden, and taking care of the kids. What are their chances in a society that sets up gender roles like ours does?

2 **assumptions** beliefs

3 **self-esteem** sense of one’s own value

4 **under careful rein** controlled, hidden

5 **deviant** abnormal, not acceptable